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The Man Who Won't Forget

SIMON WIESENTHAL
A Life in Search of Justice
By Hella Pick
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By Glenn Frankel

ONE AFTERNOON in September, 1944, a German concentration camp guard named Merz takes Simon Wiesenthal, one of his Jewish prisoners, to scavenge the countryside for potatoes. As Hella Pick recounts in her new biography of Wiesenthal, Merz surprises his prisoner during a break by asking, "Suppose you were taken on a magic carpet to the United States, what would you tell them? How it was in the concentration camps? How they treated the Jews?"

Wiesenthal is aware that the wrong answer might get him shot, but he finally replies, "I believe I would tell the truth.". Merz's response: "They would think you are crazy. They would never believe you."

By a series of small miracles, Simon Wiesenthal survived the war, and his subsequent life as Holocaust archivist and Nazi hunter has been one unceasing attempt to make the world believe the unbelievable. In his pursuit of war criminals ranging from the master engineer of the killing machine, Adolf Eichmann, to the lowliest brutal camp guard, Wiesenthal has followed the principle that guilt is indi-

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BY FRANK JOHNSTON--THE WASHINGTON POST

Simon Wiesenthal with a Special Gold Medal given by the U.S. Congress in 1980

vidual rather than collective, that each person must be accountable for what he or she did, and that each should be dealt with by legal means and not by acts of retaliation or revenge.

Wiesenthal, who is now 87, has won fame and acclaim in the West and has even been portrayed as a heroic character in two Hollywood movies: "The Odessa File" and "The Boys from Brazil." Closer to home, however, he has always been under attack. Political leaders in his adopted homeland of Austria have reviled him for pursuing former Nazis in their ranks. Communists have falsely accused him of being an American agent.

But the criticism that has hurt most has come from fellow Jews. Other Nazi hunters belittled his role in the hunt for Eichmann, and leaders of the World Jewish Congress have accused him of covering up Austrian president Kurt Waldheim's Nazi past. Wiesenthal's towering ego, hypersensitivity to criticism and inability to work with others have not helped his cause.

Now comes Pick, former diplomatic editor of the Guardian newspaper in London and herself a Jewish refugee from pre-war Austria, with a book that sorts through the arguments and the accusations. She writes that she began as a neutral observer but gradually became persuaded that, warts and all, Simon Wiesenthal is a unique hero. Her careful marshalling of the evidence and her unadorned and judiciously plodding prose style help persuade us of Wiesenthal's virtue and integrity.

Pick retells the remarkable story of how Wiesenthal survived 13 concentration camps, a half-dozen escape attempts, near-fatal injuries and illnesses and a failed suicide attempt. When liberated he weighed 99 pounds. After the war, his photographic memory and sense of mission made him an invaluable resource for American war-crimes investigators. But Wiesenthal quickly decided to set out on his own, gathering witnesses' accounts, compiling lists of war criminals and pressing the German, American and Israeli authorities for action.

After others lost the scent, Wiesenthal persisted in keeping track of Eichmann's family, preventing his wife Vera from having him declared dead in 1947 and deducing correctly in 1953 that Eichmann had fled to Argentina. Despite the claims of Isser Harel, then-chief of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, that Wiesenthal's contributions were useless, Pick concludes that he laid some of the important groundwork for the Mossad manhunt that led to Eichmann's capture and execution.

THE DISPUTE over Waldheim was even more corrosive. Wiesenthal insisted that while Waldheim was a "world-class liar" and Nazi collaborator, there was insufficient evidence to charge him with war crimes. The World Jewish Congress, which led the assault on Waldheim, contended that Wiesenthal was merely covering up his own incompetence because he had given Waldheim a clean bill of health in 1979 when he was asked informally by Israeli friends to look at Waldheim's war record in the then-Yugoslavia.

Pick concludes that Wiesenthal should have dug deeper in 1979 and that his later stubbornness may have stemmed from pride as well as from a long-standing feud with the WJC. But she exonerates him from the charge of coverup. She supports his conclusions that the WJC's evidence fell short of proving war crimes, that the Yugoslav documents it relied upon were of dubious validity and that its campaign against Waldheim was counterproductive because it fanned the flames of Austrian xenophobia and anti-Semitism and helped guarantee Waldheim's election as Austrian president.

Pick's calm, measured conclusions are unlikely to be the last word. She argues convincingly that Wiesenthal deserves better than the vituperation that the World Jewish Congress has showered upon him, despite his mistakes in judgment and his ego. She concludes that he played a major role in forcing world leaders and public opinion alike "to confront the memory of the Holocaust as a means of cleansing the moral fabric of present and future generations." ■